

John Mason Peck, Zealot of Education

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Education is arguably one of the most important endeavors anyone can undertake.

Humans are distinguished from other animals by the capability for higher learning and to utilize this ability is to assert humanity. As evidenced by the present argument in Dover, Pennsylvania over the reaching of Intelligent Design in public schools, separation of church and state in the area of education is a carefully watched barrier. However, not long ago, the majority of places for higher education were associated directly with religion. It was during this time that John Mason Peck lived and affected the education system of Illinois.

John Mason Peck was born near Litchfield, Connecticut, on October 31, 1789. He received little formal education while growing up on a farm. In 1809, he married Sarah Paine from New York and two years later the couple moved to Big Hollow, New York and converted to Baptism.

It was that year that Peck declared that God had called him to preach. The minister at the church which he attended was only available one Sunday a month, and the church readily accepted Peck as a preacher. He devoted the next six years to preaching, teaching, and organizing churches and Sunday schools in the region.

Luther Rice, a passionate Baptist missionary, came to New York in 1815 and encouraged Peck to work with developing missions. In 1816, enticed by this work, Peck decided to offer himself as a missionary. A year later, Peck was appointed to become a missionary for the Missouri Territory which made him the first Baptist missionary in that

region. Under him, the first missionary society in the West was formed. Once in St. Louis with his family, Peck again proved himself instrumental in establishing churches and Sunday schools, teaching all the while. He made sure that qualified teachers were hired in these schools. However, he found few eligible. This led him to the realization that a school to train teachers was necessary. This idea would stay with Peck for years to come.

Throughout his life, Peck showed a love for education, both for himself and others. In 1816, when waiting to be given a missionary assignment, he had traveled to Philadelphia to study under William Staughton, a widely renowned preacher and educator, where he remained for one year. In 1826 Peck spent a year at college in Philadelphia again, where he studied Greek, Latin, the sciences and medicine.

In 1820, Peck was instructed to go to Indiana to conduct missionary work. However, Peck ignored the order because he believed his true calling was to work in the St. Louis region and he stayed for two additional years before moving to a farm in Rock Spring, Illinois, three miles west of Lebanon, St. Clair County, Illinois.

According to the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive on *John Mason Peck*, “Peck had theological education in mind as early as 1817, but after 1825 it became an obsession.” Therefore, he traveled back East to raise funds to construct a Baptist seminary. Peck managed to collect over \$500 in addition to his own contributions. With this money, in 1827, he constructed a two-story building with two one-story wings on his property, near his house. Enrollment began at 25, and then quickly rose to 100. Peck acted as professor of theology. Thus, Illinois’ first school for higher education was established.

“‘Rock-spring Theological Seminary and High-School’ was the first institution in the State of a higher dignity than a common country-school,” according to one biographer. This institution set the groundwork for further advancement of education in Illinois.

Peck’s fervor for educating others is shown by his involvement with a newspaper. The press has been used since its creation to educate the public on facts and news as well as on opinions and subjective matter through editorials. In 1829, *The Pioneer*, a single-page newspaper was issued at Rock Spring, with Peck serving as editor. In the same year, Peck purchased the interests of the publisher and became the sole owner, while remaining editor. He made it into a church newspaper, probably the first in Illinois. Peck continued to write editorials as the editor until 1839, when the paper was merged with another paper. He also authored several books including Guide for Emigrants, which contained sketches of Illinois and adjacent parts, and the Life of Daniel Boone.

When Rock Spring Seminary was in danger of closing, Peck obtained a contribution of \$10,000 to ensure its continuation. Benjamin Shurtleff was the altruistic force behind this donation. The school was moved at this time and was reopened in Alton, Illinois. Here it was renamed Shurtleff College in recognition of its benefactor.

Jason Mason Peck, though not raised in an educated environment, developed a passion for it. He pursued the furthering of his own intellect and sought to instruct others for the majority of his life. On March 15, 1858, Peck died in Rock Springs, Illinois, after suffering a severe fever four years earlier. Six years prior to his death, Harvard conferred on him an honorary degree. His zeal for education has had a lasting effect on Illinois, as well as any place his services were rendered. Just as education is surely one of the

greatest ventures to undertake, John Mason Peck was surely a great man. [From *A Baptist Mission Brief: John Mason Peck*.

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